

## **Imperial Valley Press**

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### **Imperial County looking up**

**By ERIC GALVAN, Staff Writer**

Grades given by the Southern California Association of Governments in its state of the region report today will show little change from 2004 to 2005.

However, of the six counties represented in the SCAG region, Imperial County may be the lone standout.

"In terms of overall grade, 2005 was generally a good year for Imperial County," said Ping Chang, principle author of the SCAG report.

SCAG's purpose is to obtain state and federal funding for infrastructure projects throughout the six-county region. The agency's focus is transportation issues, but it deals with other infrastructure planning issues. It is SCAG that sets the priority list for the region for the use of such funds.

The SCAG region includes Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura counties and 187 cities. Imperial County accounts for about 1 percent of the entire population in the SCAG region.

"Because the county makes up about 1 percent of the population in the region," Chang said, "Imperial County would be different than some of the regional averages."

The SCAG region was graded in seven categories for 2005: employment, income, housing, mobility, air quality, education and safety.

In housing, the SCAG region received a D grade. However, in terms of growth, Imperial County was one of the tops in the state.

In the midst of a housing boom in 2005, Imperial County ranked third in the state in growth rate, increasing 3.1 percent. For the region, the county experienced the highest growth rate with building permits increasing from 1,200 units to 2,900 units, an increase of 140 percent over 2004-05. Home ownership remained at 58 percent.

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"Certainly we've seen a huge change in the entire growth industry," Imperial County regional SCAG council member Jon Edney said. "But you're going to see that change every year. It's not going to be quite as level year in and year out."

Edney, who also is a member of the El Centro City Council, said he figures 2006 numbers will show a slow-down in growth as growth projections for the year have changed.

"We're probably going to see huge highs and fairly large drop-offs," Edney said. "But that's much like Southern California as a whole."

Imperial County's employment rate was reflective of the B grade given to the region.

The county's payroll jobs in 2005 increased by 2,900, a 5.7 percent increase, after a 1.2 percent decline in 2004. The unemployment rate also improved from 17.4 percent in 2004 to 15.8 percent.

"Imperial County has been doing very well from an employment perspective," Chang said.

Overall, while Imperial County was comparable with the rest of the region and in some aspects performed better and worse, Edney said the report is something the county can learn from.

"While we certainly don't always like the grades that come out," Edney said, "the report card is an opportunity to review how we're doing and without a doubt there are things to continue to work on.

"By and large, I'm not as concerned with the grades," he said, "but it gives us a measuring bar. I think it's an excellent wake-up call."

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